

Sympathizing with Minorities

By Philip Carl Salzman

When one of my friends and colleagues accused me of being unsympathetic to minorities, I was indignant. How dare he? After all, I am myself a member of a much maligned and prejudicially treated minority ethnic group, with which I identify strongly. Not only that, both of my children are “visible minorities,” as we like to say here in Canada: my son was adopted from Thailand; my daughter was adopted from China.

In our current cultural moment, to be unsympathetic to minorities implies the worst sins we can imagine: oppression of the vulnerable, racism, male supremacism, heteronormality, and Islamophobia. Who but the most egocentric, ethnocentric cynic, or the most self-serving, callous exploiter, or the most fearful, insecure weakling, could be unsympathetic to minorities?

Yet, the more I thought about it, the more I agree that I am unsympathetic to minorities. The reason is that I object to dealing with people in terms of their allocation to gross, demographic census categories. Are we to think of individuals only or primarily in terms of whether they are a member of one or another racial, gender, ethnic, sexual, or religious category? This is a form of reductionism that “disappears” the individual human being into a few general features, implies if not asserts that this is the most important things about them, advises treating them according to their categories, and succeeds in dividing our society into opposing and conflicting regiments.

Many people, these days, take the view that some categories of people are more important than others, just like the animals in *Animal Farm*, where all are equal, but some are more equal than others. For example, if you say “black lives matter,” you are on the side of the angels; but if you say “all lives matter,” you are an evil emissary of white supremacy and its leader, Satan. If you say “the future is female,” you are lauded and being foresightful and *simpatico*; but if you say we should be concerned about men’s rights, you are a sexist chauvinist “mansplaining,” and should be silent or be silenced. If you say, “Allahu Akbar” (Allah is the Greatest), you are just expressing the “religion of peace”; if you oppose the importation of sharia law and insist on the separation of church and state, you are an Islamophobe and racist fascist.

The key to sorting out who are the good guys and who are the bad guys is identifying victim categories: members of victim categories, or, better, multiple victim categories, are to be favoured, while anyone who is not a member of a victim category, is a member of an oppressor category who should be disfavoured. Through the magic of “intersectionality”¹ we can discover who are the worthy victims; the more victimhood categories someone can claim, the more worthy they are: non-white, female, minority race (except Asians), minority religion (except Jews), gay, bisexual, transsexual, transvestite, etc. etc., handicapped, poor, homeless, mentally ill, etc. The complementary side of the equation is the oppressors and exploiters: whites, males, Western European ethnicity, heterosexuals, Christians and Jews.

You may wonder where all of this oppressor-victim categorization comes from. It is drawn in the first instance from Marxism, which posits class conflict between the exploited proletariat and oppressing bourgeoisie as the dynamic that will destroy capitalism and establish socialism.² That was not popular in North America, where most people see themselves as middle class. But sociologists who came to define their field as “the study of inequality” extended class conflict to other, non-economic classes: genders, races, ethnicities, sexual subgroups, religions, etc. The sociologists added that the oppression and victimization was “structural,” with individuals’ intentions unimportant.³

The analysis and encouragement of gender, race, ethnic, etc. class conflicts have been labelled “cultural marxism.” Sociologists, it appears, have convinced us to think of people solely in terms of their census categories, on the one hand, and their victim credentials, on the other. Another neat twist sociologists treat us to, is that victims of structural disadvantage can never be said to be biased, to be sexist, racist, or heterophobic, because they are victims; no matter

¹ <https://sisteroutrider.wordpress.com/2016/07/27/intersectionality-a-definition-history-and-guide/>

² <https://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/CIP.CHAP5.HTM>

³ <http://sociology.iresearchnet.com/sociology-of-race/structural-or-institutional-racism/>

how much hate they feel about other categories, or what nasty things they say about them, they cannot be considered at fault. According to the sociologists, only the oppressors—whites, men, heterosexuals, etc.—can be racist, sexist, and sex-practice phobic.

Apparently, we are all sociologists now, for our culture now privileges this sociological analysis of our lives and society. All of our major institutions have incorporated this oppressor-victim analysis, and are enthusiastically and energetically acting to provide benefits for members of victim categories, and constraints if not outright banishment for members of oppressor categories. The Government of Canada, through the Research Councils that it funds, under the cover of “diversity,” is pushing for more members of “victim” categories to be recruited and hired, especially Indigenous and females. As females now dominate in the social sciences, humanities, education, social work, and law, they have put in place a consultant’s program to bring more females into science.⁴ The Government had already required that Canadian Indigenous natives be admitted as students and hired as professors, or else funds would be denied.⁵

Do not imagine that Canadian university administrations had to have their arms twisted, or be dragged to progressive “diversity.” In fact, now largely dominated by females, university administrations have leapt at the opportunity to bring female dominance to the sciences, whether or not female students are keen. McGill University had a major publicity campaign, with banners and posters all over campus, celebrated females in science.⁶ At the same time, a large program was initiated to recruit Indigenous students and hire Indigenous professors.⁷

In fact, university administrations across the country are scrambling to hire Indigenous professors and administrators. So the competition is fierce.⁸ My Anthropology Department at McGill made offers of professorial posts to two Indigenous academics, and both refused to take (more lucrative?) positions at other universities. Similar favouritism to members of “victim” categories can be seen in the public service, federal⁹ and provincial¹⁰, and in public and private companies.¹¹

What objections could I possibly have to gender, racial, and ethnic student recruitment and gender hiring in order to benefit people in victim categories?

One objection is that the opposite of bigotry is not more bigotry, but fairness. Where once women, Jews, Asians, and Indigenous were blocked entirely or discriminated against, now whites, men, Christians, Jews, and, remarkably, Asians, are discriminated against. This highly illiberal favouritism rejects the fairness of universalistic standards, and instead, using the beard of “diversity,” celebrates “good” reverse sexism, racism, and bigotry. Despising people of certain categories in the past have been replaced in the advocacy for “social justice” by despising people of other categories.

We should be very clear that for every female that is hired because she is female, a male is not hired because he is male.¹² For every person of colour hired because he or she is a person of colour, a person of white is not hired because he or she is a person of white. For every Indigenous native hired because he or she is an Indigenous native, people with other backgrounds—Asian, Middle Eastern, African Oceanian, South American, or Euro-American—are refused the opportunity to compete for the position. What we have now, given Canadian Government and university priorities and actions, is structural or institutional reverse racism disadvantaging whites, men, Euro-Canadians, Asians, and Christians and Jews.¹³

⁴ http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/NSERC-CRSNG/EDI-EDI/Athena-SWAN_eng.asp

⁵ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ottawa-to-pull-research-chair-funding-unless-diversity-issue-addressed-at-universities/article34905004/>

⁶ <https://www.mcgill.ca/science/events/mini>

⁷ https://www.mcgill.ca/provost/files/provost/crc_edi_plan_final.pdf

⁸ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/university-of-windsor-wants-to-hire-five-of-canada-s-best-and-brightest-indigenous-professors-1.4199402>

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/dalhousie-university-recruitment-management-racially-visible-indigenous-1.4531723>

<https://www.ubyssey.ca/news/the-gold-rush-canadian-academia-rush-indigenous-faculty/>

⁹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/corporate/reports/building-diverse-inclusive-public-service-final-report-joint-union-management-task-force-diversity-inclusion.html>

¹⁰ <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/careers-myhr/about-the-bc-public-service/diversity-inclusion-respect>

¹¹ <http://www.canadastop100.com/diversity/>

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/top-employers/diversity-and-inclusion-give-these-firms-a-competitive-advantage/article38217315/>

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjB83vcWhCY&t=4s>

¹³ <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/turns-out-there-is-discrimination-in-hiring-professors-but-not-against-minorities>

A second objection is that considerations of academic merit and excellence are no longer primary considerations at universities, but are replaced by the “social justice” of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. The strongest academic and intellectual candidates for a position—as a student, professor, or administrator—may never even be considered, never mind admitted or hired. In other words, institutions of higher education are no longer pursuing the purpose that they were designed to serve, for which citizens have funded them with billions of tax dollars. Universities are no longer communities of scholars, but congeries of squabbling racial, gender, and ethnic factions. This is the “progress” that “progressives” have brought to higher education.

A remarkable example of the jettisoning of academic criteria in favour of “social justice” reverse racism, sexism, and bigotry is the discrimination against people of Asian background. Although the history of Asians in North America shows centuries of prejudice, discrimination, and disadvantage, today, Asian Americans¹⁴ and Asian Canadians¹⁵ are discriminated against because they study too hard, work too hard, conform too well, and are successful. They are no longer victims, and so must be victimized!

“Social justice” reverse discrimination is seen not only in admissions and hiring, but also in the classroom. A newly popular teaching technique called “progressive stacking” in which “professors call on students who may be - for a variety of reasons - less likely to have their say. While every student is different, the reasons typically reflect the implicit biases observed outside the classroom, such as those related to race, gender, religion, sexual orientation or disability status. So, according to progressive stacking, a professor would call on a black or Latina woman before a white man, for example.”¹⁶

A third objection is that, while protecting the rights of minorities is necessary and just, to disregard the rights of the majority to be treated fairly is both unjust and undemocratic.¹⁷ Long struggles over centuries with feudalism, royalty, and aristocracy finally gave birth to democracy, in which the majority get to decide, within constitutional limits, questions of the day. Many countries to this day do not have democracy.¹⁸ To dismiss the majority as evil oppressors, and to discriminate against its members in access to the benefits of society, such as jobs, is unconscionable and tyrannical. Why exactly are we electing governments that not only condone, but encourage such discrimination?

My most important objection is the inhumane reduction of human beings to gross census categories. What a sad place we have come to when we treat individual human beings, not as complex individuals with particular qualities, abilities, values, motivations, and preferences, but as uniform members of races, genders, sexualities, ethnicities.

Are all white people the same? Black people? Men? Women? Asians? Gays? To ask the question is to demonstrate how ridiculous it is treating all people according to gross categories. Not that the great university champions of “diversity” ever bother delving, in their pursuit to racial, gender, and ethnic quotas, into the diversity within all categories of people.

You will not be surprised to hear that I do not want to be treated as a member of a census category, neither in my favour or against me. Consequently, I strive to treat people as I wish to be treated, as individuals, taking into account as much as possible their particular qualities and achievements. This is not just an abstract idea. For fifty years I taught university students, a wide range of individuals diverse in many respects. I do not claim to be a perfect person, but it never occurred to me to weigh a student’s category membership in grading. Furthermore, I took steps, such as reading essays “blind,” not knowing the name of the author, to ensure that I was never biased, consciously or unconsciously, on the basis of category membership, personal qualities, or past performance. I always strove to be fair, on the basis of universalistic academic criteria. And that is the way it should be.

But how things have changed! Should we Canadians be proud that the primary policy of our governments and universities is racial, gender, ethnic, and sexual bigotry?

¹⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/30/politics/harvard-justice-department-affirmative-action-asian-americans-lawsuit/index.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/too-asian/>

¹⁶ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/10/20/penn-grad-student-says-shes-under-attack-teaching-technique-encourage-all-talk-class>

¹⁷ <https://fcpp.org/2018/03/09/should-minorities-rule/>

¹⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>

About the Author



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